

Thomas Lancaster

Interviewed by Peter Myers at The SPCO Center, Saint Paul, Jan. 28, 2008

Q I'd be curious to hear about your early memories of music. What kind of music was present in your home growing up? What were your earliest experiences with music that may have set you on a track to devote your life to it?

A My earliest experiences in music in the home were basically listening to the radio and my parents doing that, the popular music of the time. I was born in 1939, so that gives you an idea – Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, people like that. I had an aunt who was a church organist and played the piano and she noticed that I was really interested in listening to recordings and music and she thought that I should do something in music. So she knew of a church choir of men and boys in Louisville, KY – I was from southern Indiana – that she thought would be something that I'd be interested in. So I went and I auditioned for that and it was really the formative musical experience in my life. So it was Christ Church Cathedral in Louisville, KY and all boys and men, a professional choir including the boys. We were paid like carfare, you know. But we felt a responsibility to be there and although we weren't schooled there – like St. Thomas for instance in New York – we were there four times a week – Monday, Wednesday, Friday – and hour and a half rehearsal each day after school and then Sunday morning rehearsal and main service at 11:00 a.m. So that was a wonderful experience. I learned so much of the Tudor church music, the wonderful music done in the Episcopal Church, ranging into the 19th century and 20th century music. It was a really great experience for me. So I did that from the time I was nine until I was 14 years old.

Q During that time what kind of musical experience, if any, were you getting in your school?

A I'd say my school musical experience was typical and they paled in comparison to what I was getting in the church choir. It was wonderful to be involved so regularly and intensely in that music there. So I don't really have a lot of memory of my school experiences. In high school I had a good choral director, but I don't have much memory of my elementary school and junior high school experience because I was so involved in that church school. It was the main thing in my life. It's the reason I ended up being a choral conductor.

Q Taking it from there, can you give us a brief description of the progression of your career?

A After I left the church choir, when my voice changed at age 14, then I had this high school singing experience, which was a good one. I even did some solos with the high school choir, still stayed pretty close to it. Then my state university was Indiana University. What a lucky thing for me. So I went there, to this great school of music and did my bachelors' degree in music education, choral emphasis and then master's degree in choral conducting. After that, I was looking around for a job and had a few offers which I didn't take – I wanted to go on to college teaching but – I ended up going to the University of Illinois for a year and started the doctorate. In the meantime, when I was

there, a wonderful job came up for me in Kentucky at Eastern Kentucky University and I went there where my future wife was the organist. We met there. I taught there for three years and it was a great experience. One of the classes there is about to have its 40th anniversary and we've been invited to come back. I still hear from some of my students from the '60's when I was there. Then I left there after three years to go to Indiana University where Julius Herford was there. He was Robert Shaw's teacher and he's the man I'd been waiting to settle down in an institution where I could go and study with him for a doctorate. So I went there and was there two years for doctoral work and that was a great experience, to be with him. I was his assistant the second year I was there and worked very closely with him. So from there the job at the U of M was open and in 1969 I came to the U of M and taught there for 35 years, retiring in 2004. During the time I was there, opportunities came up on the outside. I had church choir for a time and then the MN Chorale job opened up and I did that for 6 years – from 1977 to 83. The second year I was doing that, positions opened up at House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul, and my wife as organist and myself as choirmaster went there. We did that for 29 years. And we just retired from that this past September. After I left the university – I retired from there in 2004 – the Bach Society position, I was asked to talk to some of the board members about that and that had been on a hiatus for a while, and we started that up again as a professional chorus of 16 singers, who sang all the arias and recitatives as well as the choral things and period instrument orchestra. So basically, that's it in a nutshell.

Q You've had a lifelong passion for the music of Bach, among other things, but that is an area that I think most people would associate with you. Talk about your interest in Bach's music and how that has become one of the mainstays of your professional life.

A My interest in Bach actually began in the choir days when I was a boy and I remember, vividly, doing Cantata 4, singing in that. It continued when I was an undergraduate just as I occasionally performed Bach at Indiana U. But then I remember there was a one-year long course at Ind U – all music of Bach – and for that you either wrote a paper or did a performance in class each semester. It was a very intense acquaintance with Bach. My interest in that just grew little by little. Of course my major professor in the doctorate – Julius Herford – that was a great interest of his and certainly he coached Robert Shaw quite a bit in his performances of Bach and other things. So it was just something that appealed to me and grew over the years. Then there's so much of that music and it's so profound that one does...one cantata goes to two and before you know it, it's 60 or more and there are still maybe 140 you haven't performed. So there's always something new, too, to do there. I did the Passions of Bach many times – St. John and St. Matthew – until I finally was introduced to the idea of creating the whole Leipzig Vespers service on Good Friday, including the St. John passion and doing it that way, which I've done a couple of times now. That's a revelation to see what it was like in the service, as much as we can nowadays, in context with the sermon and hymns and organ works and so forth. So there's always something new. I just went to a conference on Bach's B Minor Mass in Belfast, Northern Ireland this fall and still things that are being dug up – new sources in places like St. Petersburg and Russia. It's amazing how things develop with the music of Bach. But it's profound and it's always a challenge to perform things like the B Minor Mass and the Passions so it becomes a continuing interest.

Q Apart from Julius Herford, who were your other important musical mentors?

A My mentors...there were two really. The first was when I was choirboy. These formative experiences stick with you all through your life. There was a man who was a choirmaster named Jack Edwin Rogers and he was organist and choirmaster and I remember admiring him so much. He had very strict discipline and rehearsals and performance and yet you could have a good time at certain times. I remember he would take us all out and buy us all Eskimo Pies after rehearsal if we did something really well. Then I admired seeing his feet fly over the pedals of the organ. He was a very instinctive musician and played jazz on the piano as well as our formal church music. So I admired him very much as a person and as a musician. Then I think the next one was Julius Herford and my doctoral work. He was such a wonderful musician. He's thought of sometimes as being a musicologist or a theorist and being academic. But he was first and foremost a very sensitive musician and to hear him play a subject from a two part invention of Bach or another theme...few people knew that he was actually a concert pianist before he came to the US. The way he heard music so beautifully in his inner ear and gave you ways of trying to get at the composer's intentions as best we can nowadays, by studying the score and learning more about the music and the times it was composed in and the compose himself or herself.

Q Switching gears now to Minnesota. Minnesota has a well-deserved reputation for being a center of choral excellence, both in quantity and quality – the number and quality of choirs we have here at all levels is quite astounding. What do you think are some of the factors that have created this reputation in MN for such a devotion to fine choral music?

A I certainly think that the devotion to fine choral music in MN comes from the Lutheran choral tradition and the Christiansen tradition and the Lutheran colleges here. It certainly has grown from that. A lot of people are involved in choirs because they had good experiences in their church choirs early, and their college choirs. It's very interesting, for instance, sometimes at House of Hope Pres Church when we have done some of these passions in the context of the service of Bach's time, the singing in the congregation is so much more vibrant on those occasions and we look at each other and say, oh the Lutherans are here. And I think there is a tradition of singing in the Lutheran church that we may not have in some of the other denominations so strongly. I think that's certainly contributed to it.

Q The period of the late '60's and early '70's was a formative period in recent memory of choral activity when a number of groups were formed. The Bach Society had been around for many years, but we had new groups like the Chorale, the Dale Warland Singers, Plymouth Music Series. That was a very fertile time. A lot of composers started writing actively for chorus. What do you think may have been going on in that era that contributed to this surge?

A I think the timing was right at that time. This was just the time when I came to MN and had not had much to do with MN other than when I was on the Indiana U gymnastics team and came up in the middle of the winter and had some meets up here thinking this is the coldest place I've ever been in my life and I would never settle here.

Yet I've been here now for 39 years. But I think that there were people at that certain time who were just ready, who had established themselves enough...Dominick Argento had been here for a while and he was writing and there was the Center Opera and there was something going on there. And Dale Warland had been at Macalester for a while and Philip Brunelle had been here all the time and beginning to establish himself. So I think the time was right for that to happen. I think also some of the graduates of these Lutheran colleges that had rich choral traditions were looking for opportunities to continue after school. With Robert Berglund and the MN Chorale that grew out of Bethel and his alumni there. And before I did that, when he was on leave one semester I went for just one semester and filled in for him before I actually became music director later and could see in those early stages how much it was related to the graduates of the college where he had taught.

Q During your various musical positions, at House of Hope and the Bach Society and MN Chorale, how has the presence of all these other choirs in the Twin Cities affected your work?

A One certainly wants to be aware of what other groups are doing in a large metropolitan area like this, and even in a wider area in other colleges in Wisconsin and Iowa and so forth when I was at the U of M. One tries not to duplicate what someone else is doing. For instance, if somebody else is doing a St. Matthew that same year, you want to work it out with that person so you're not both doing it at the same time and competing with each other. I remember a number of occasions being on the phone with other choral directors and talking about what we had planned for the next season and me calling them and them calling me or doing it by email in more recent times, and coordinating what we do. And even sometimes even having collaborations together. For instance, for a couple of years we had an agreement with House of Hope and St. Mark's where the first year we hired, brought in, an English conductor – Sir David Wilcox – and did a big work by Herbert Howells. Put the two church choirs and a few others together and had him conduct a large group. We tried to get someone who'd worked with the original composer and had the word from the original composer. The next year we had Simon Preston come in and did Walton's Belshazzar's Feast and did it over at House of Hope. So sometimes collaborations develop out of these things.

Q Talk about one of the most rewarding collaborations in which you have been involved.

A I first of all must say that the most rewarding collaboration I've had in my lifetime has been with my wife, as a musician. She is a wonderful organist and a wonderful accompanist and we have worked on and off together – mostly on – since we first met, when she played piano for Messiah rehearsals I was doing. I thought, what a wonderful accompanist and then of course the personal interest came and we were married after about a year. But she is such a wonderful performer and she has not only influenced how I interpret music by getting to know more about the organ, for instance, but even gotten me to delve into some repertoire that I probably wouldn't have gotten into – the French romantic repertoire, which is so rich for the organ and for choral music. There were works by Vierne and Widor and Franck, that I probably wouldn't have gotten into if it hadn't been for her. Besides that, I think some of the collaborations with the orchestras I would have to say are some of the most memorable ones. Many

preparations that I did for the MN Orchestra, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and beyond that the MN Opera Company as well having prepared choruses for them. I remember in 1975 Argento's Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe, which was a big, big undertaking and half the chorus was from the U of MN and half of it was from the apprentice program of the MN Opera. About 400 page score, 300 pages involved chorus. So these have been very rewarding. Then personally, collaborations between some of the vocal groups I've conducted and some of the orchestras that have accompanied them that I've conducted. There's a group called the Bach Chamber Players of St. Paul that was formed by Richard Killmer, who was the principal oboe of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, John Miller the principal bassoon of the MN Orchestra and myself. They wanted to play Bach and they wanted to take members out of the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and the MN Chamber Orchestra, put them together and do performances. So we formed that group in 1980, I think it was, at House of Hope and it continues to this day performing especially lots of Bach cantatas and other works. So those collaborations have been wonderful too – the ones with the orchestras and the opera company.

Q When you are forming a chorus or auditioning for a chorus, what are some of the things that you look for in your singers?

A When auditioning singers for a chorus it depends on what kind of a chorus it is. Is it an all-volunteer chorus, is it a partly professional chorus and part volunteer, is it a professional chorus? So I would have to speak to each one individually to some extent. But I would say for a choral singer who's a volunteer or perhaps a student, you want somebody with good true pitch, who's interested in singing in choral music, who's not a prima donna. I remember certain students who when Robert Shaw came and did a guest rehearsal with us at the U one time, one singer who was in the opera program who sat right in the front row and sang as loud as she could right at him, to try to be discovered. One certainly doesn't want singers like that in a chorus, or one has to team them. Being a graduate of Indiana U, which is a big opera school I certainly...one of the things we had to do there was tame the voices and get them to work together because so many of them were such big voices. So you have to have a good blend of voices. With professionals I look for not only a beautiful voice, but fine musicianship, so that they're sensitive about shaping phrases and shaping words and doing all of the things that in addition to good pitch, make music beautiful, choral music beautiful. And we look for people who like to be involved with other people in a collaborative way so that they are not only interested in the solos, but also get things from singing in the choruses and singing with other people like a good chamber instrumentalist does.

Q How do you keep singers motivated and engaged week after week, or day after day as you rehearse pieces for hours and hours, collectively over the course of a week or a month?

A I've never worried about keeping students or singers engaged in rehearsing things over and over again because I think if the conductor approaches the score right, and the conductor's very excited about the music he or she is doing, and that excitement has to carry over into having people committed to doing it. If it's great music and worthy of your time and you use the time well, then you don't waste people's time and yet you

have an atmosphere where people can occasionally relax and not be completely intense all the time and have a laugh every once in awhile and enjoy each others company. But basically, use the time well and if things are improving and things are sounding better, then they will be involved. For instance, generally people who do new music – unless they're real professionals – don't like a piece the first time you do it. Well, it's not that they don't like the piece, but it's that it doesn't sound good yet. So if you keep improving the piece then they say, well there's something here, and that keeps their interest up. And then, finally, they often just love the piece when they really hear how it should be when it's as close to possibly perfected – it's never perfect, but we try for that.

Q How do you go about preparing a piece, developing your concept of what you think the composer's intent was in preparing yourself and your choir?

A Preparing a work is a thing that I've thought about a lot because I taught the graduate in choral conducting for so many years at the U of M, and because in my own graduate study and my doctoral work I went to a person who was the master of that – how to prepare a score. And that's mainly what I went to learn. So I even developed an outline that I would give to students at the U in my classes as to how one should go about it. I think most often the biggest mistake that's made in that is if a person's spending any time at all preparing a score, is to immediately go to the musical details without seeing the broader picture. So I always emphasize starting with understanding something about the times in which the piece was written, the reason it was written, what kinds of singers and instrumentalists were involved in the performance, were there boy sopranos, were there (?), were there women, and therefore what kind of tone quality did the composer have mind? So there are many broad, even sociological factors, and political factors that go into it that one has to know about if one's really going to understand the work. And then how it relates to other music of the time. For instance I remember a program done by the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra many years ago in which Beethoven's 4th Symphony was set in context. Roger Norrington was the conductor of that program. It was put in context and there was a symphony and a flute concerto on the same program by a contemporary of Beethoven. Hearing those two things first, then, makes one hear Beethoven's 4th in a completely different context than we would if it were on a mixed program from different periods. So that was really an interesting thing for me to hear. So that goes into it. Then working down from those broadest aspects of the score to ever-finer details until you're finally looking at the individual parts and how they relate to one another, how they would be phrased and all of the things that go into the finest points of performance. But there's a steady progression if one follows that kind of an outline. Of course the students, at first, have to kind of think about the outline but once you've worked for a while, you don't have to think about the outline anymore. You're discovering these things on your own in a natural process. But as to how you pass that along in a rehearsal, certainly you want to discover things by being into the music itself, and then occasionally mentioning a few things. You may make a few introductory comments about it to help people understand it, but sometimes its good just to plunge in and say, oh did you notice that? Well that's because...they need to understand what they're doing – the performers, themselves. But not through a lecture. Through discovering it in the music and then maybe making a few comments about it.

Q Not all of our conductors came up through the Lutheran colleges. There are a few others like you or Kathy Romey who came from elsewhere and had somewhat different backgrounds.

A Actually at Indiana – besides my English choirboy background when I got to Indiana – that was the other big school – when I first went there – was Westminster Choir College. The dean of Ind U was a graduate of Westminster and George Kruger, who was the main conductor when I first went as an undergraduate – both Westminster. So that was a completely different school. Those were the two big ones, with very different approaches.

Q Over the years, how have you introduced your singers to other musical styles, both contemporary compositions and other musical traditions that are not from the Scandinavian and German worlds?

A There have been a number of things. Of course, my early training in English music, I've continued to have an interest in that. Even though in my graduate studies there wasn't a particular emphasis on it, I found that since it was a part of my childhood that I just naturally turned back. Of course, having the last name Lancaster, that I have some roots in England so I've continued my interest in that. But also I've had an interest in American music. I remember in the early days at the U of M there was an emphasis on Charles Ives and we had a Charles Ives Festival. I was very much involved in performing in that. So I've always been interested in American music as well. In the English music, I was particularly interested in and got to know a composer named Kenneth Leighton and then I found that one of his students at the U of Edinburgh – when I asked his widow after he died who some of his most prominent students were – it turned out it was one who just studied orchestration and counterpoint with him and it was James MacMillan. He's a fascinating composer and the MN Orchestra has commissioned a piano concerto from him and they just did the cello concerto a year or so ago. I did the American premier of Seven Last Words and got to know him and now am commissioning an anthem that's going to be performed in March at House of Hope Pres. Church by him. So there are a lot of interests besides my interest in Bach, which of course was related to the German tradition and continues with that. German composers have always interested me too, but I think those other areas are interesting. Then through the U of M, there's such an active group of composers there. I've certainly been involved in doing some of the pieces of Argento and some of his students and some of Paul Fetler's students and Eric Stokes's students. I remember doing a session there where Eric Stokes's students we did all pieces that had non-singing sounds in them and my singers becoming hyperventilated with some of these experimental sounds. I remember doing a whole concert with the chamber singers of a composers group called, Entourage E Cla at the U of M. All those composers, an entire concert of their music. So it's important to emerging composers, I think, as well as established composers. And of course one of the most satisfactory things I've done with established composers was the opera, The Three Hermits, by Stephen Paulus, which we commissioned at House of Hope and did three sold out performances in 1997 and then did six more performances in 2001, and that's become his most performed opera now and the final chorus has taken on a life of its own in the a capella version done by

college choirs, community choirs and we're just so happy that that piece has done so well and will continue, I'm sure, to do well.

Q Talk in general about the importance of commissioning new works. Why should we keep working to commission new works of choral literature?

A It's important to commission new works of choral music and other new works of music because music needs to continue to grow and develop. We can't just perform music of former times. It's only more recently in history that we've even done that at all, to speak of, and concentrated on performing older music. We need to help young composers to develop and we need to allow established composers to maybe expand into other genre. So it's important to have them do certain kinds of works. For instance, at House of Hope we thought about who would we get to compose a work that we decided we wanted for the 150th anniversary of the church that would involve two organs. We have a wonderful situation there that's like the large French cathedrals, which has the large organ in the back of the church and the smaller, choir organ – which is actually a French organ from the 19th century – in the front of the church. So we thought, who, of a living composer, would understand that style – the French style that would involve two organs and a choir or two choirs, turned out to be two choirs and two organs, children's choir and adult choir. Then we thought, the person who's so indebted to French music is Frank Fercole, a composer who was actually Dale Warland's composer in residence for a time. Certainly he was the guy to understand this style and to do it. But he hadn't done anything like that before so that was an opportunity for him to do that. So it's important that music continues to grow and develop and composers continue to develop. We have some very interesting ones nowadays emerging.

Q People often speak of choral music as a great means of building community. In all of your years in different choirs that you've been involved in, how do you think that choral music has helped to build community?

A I think choral music helps to build community through drawing in audiences, for one thing, to hear choral works. Some that have social or historical backgrounds, like Britten's War Requiem, and makes people think about certain things. But also, within the chorus itself, the relationships I've seen, particularly with a church choir. When you have a university group and people are there for basically four years and then they're gone, you have four years to build community but if you have a church choir or a community choir, and people are in there for 10, 20 or more years, then I've found with a church choir it becomes a support group and people are fast friends within. We still have some of our closest friends are members of the church choir, even though we've retired from that now. Having a common purpose, doing something beautiful together, people dedicated toward a common goal, builds a kind of a bond that is very difficult to describe. It has many very different aspects to it and brings people very close together.

Q How can we best instill this passion for choral music in future generations?

A I think we can instill this passion for choral in future generations in a number of ways. I think we have to get back to having more music in the schools. I know when we saw that diminishing in the early 1980's at House of Hope, we saw an opportunity to

furnish another outlet and formed a choir school there and hired its own director. At that time, we took our committee around...I had known from my early experiences in a church choir as a boy, how important that was to me my whole life long, being part of a team effort, doing something beautiful with other people. So I was seeing fewer and fewer opportunities in the schools, as music was being cut back so the church decided we would start our own choir school and open it up to people who were not members of the church but allow them to come in and do something fine with a specialist director and that's still going, over 25 years old now and the director is a student who came up through the program and then became a music major at the U of M. Her name is Sophia Ardelon and is doing a wonderful job, who is a wonderful musician, a violinist, a pianist and singer as well as a conductor. It's been very gratifying to see that happen.

Q How can we instill a passion for singing?

A I think instilling a passion for singing is a matter of having a good experience for the singers to achieve a good level of performance and they will be drawn to it and think that's a worthy effort and something they want to put their time into. Having a fine level of performance and having it a good experience for them – socially as well as musically – is what we need to do.

Q If you were mentoring an aspiring choral conductor today, what would you say to him or her?

A I've mentored many an aspiring choral conductors at the U of M in the graduate program, masters and doctoral programs and there are many things that I say to them. But first of all, people ask me the question – sometimes even before they get to that point – is should they go into music or there's this other interest that they have that they may go into. I think back to my formative years when I was interested in music first but then along came gymnastics and there was a little time when I thought, well do I want to do that? Well, no it was because I couldn't be happy doing anything other than music that I went into music. And I think that's the answer there. But as far as mentoring an aspiring choral conductor, someone who's already decided that they want to go into that field, my advice is to dedicate yourself to the music. That is, really find the true essence of the music by hard work and study and pass on your enthusiasm that comes out of that to your groups. You also have to recruit good singers and that's different depending upon whether it's a professional level, a church choir or a community chorus or a university group as to how you go about that. But you certainly want to recruit those people. That tends to feed – if you're doing good work, good singers tend to come to it.

Q What do you know now that you wish you had known earlier in your career?

A I don't think there's any one thing, or even two things that I know now that I wish I'd known earlier. I knew that I wanted to learn how to interpret music in the best way possible, early on. But I have learned how to do that through experience and I don't think there's any substitute for experience. I've even thought when training conductors that I always reminded myself that they were going to grow more after they left me, through their experience, and if I could set the right principles in their conducting and their way of approaching the music, then they were ready to grow on their own. So I believe it's the experience. Learning more works and what you learn in one, transfers to

another. And you can only get that through doing it year after year and doing it in the best possible way that is trying to really get at the essence of the work and doing your homework. And out of that comes wonderful enthusiasm for the music that you pass along to the ensemble members, whether they're singers or orchestral players or whatever. If you are doing justice to the music, they will respond to it and you will have a wonderful product.

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